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Central Intelligence Agency



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## DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

14 July 1983

USSR: POLITICO-MILITARY OBJECTIVES AND OPTIONS  
IN THE CARIBBEAN BASINSummary

The USSR is strengthening the military capabilities of Cuba and Nicaragua as part of a long-term effort to foster Marxism in the Caribbean and Central America. It is seeking to expand Soviet influence by helping consolidate pro-Soviet Marxist regimes and by weakening and isolating the US.

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Moscow probably sees substantial strategic advantage to having the US preoccupied with developments in the region. It welcomes this diversion of US resources and energies from areas more vital to the USSR and also hopes to profit from the growing US friction with West European allies over regional policy. Although Moscow's main motive in providing arms to Cuba and Nicaragua is to deter US military action and consolidate leftist regimes, the Soviets are undoubtedly pleased that this is also forcing the US to pay more military attention to the area.

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In our judgment, Moscow does not assign high priority to a dramatic expansion of the Soviet military presence in the Caribbean Basin. Nevertheless, the USSR is likely to continue incrementally to expand its limited military activity there--but in ways that do not provoke the US or serve to rally American domestic or European support behind stronger US policies in the region.

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Moscow might continue improving Cuban defenses by introducing such new weapons as SA-5 antiaircraft missiles, SSC-3 coastal defense missile systems, and MIG-25 high-altitude fighters. It could begin direct delivery to Nicaragua of major weapons instead of just sending military support equipment. And it might increase the use of Cuban airfields by Soviet planes and begin using airfields being built in Nicaragua and Grenada. More extreme—but, we believe, unlikely—Soviet steps could include deploying land-based ballistic missiles to Cuba or Nicaragua and basing Backfire bombers there.

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#### Soviet Strategic Objections

The main Soviet objective in the Caribbean Basin is to turn an area which has traditionally been dominated by the US into an area of growing Communist influence and a troublesome distraction for the US.

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The USSR has seized the opportunities created by the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua four years ago and by growing political radicalism in other Caribbean basin countries. Moscow has reversed its long neglect of Central America and Caribbean countries other than Cuba mainly because it saw opportunities in its competition with the US. Although peripheral to major Soviet interests, the area offers relatively cheap prospects for gains in the worldwide political competition by damaging American interests in an area vital to Washington.

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As instability in the region has begun to preoccupy the US more deeply, Moscow has probably become convinced that the value of its own involvement has grown. It has welcomed the diversion of US political energies and military and economic resources from other international arenas which it views as more vital to its interests. Furthermore, the Soviets may hope that the growth of domestic dissension within the US over policy toward Central America will not only shackle policy but also intensify what the Soviets perceive as a post-Vietnam reluctance to maintain a global involvement. Finally, Moscow welcomes the friction that has arisen between Washington and its West European allies and hemispheric friends, and is benefiting from the distraction this has afforded from its involvement in Poland and Afghanistan.

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The Soviets do not seem to anticipate that revolutionary trends will mature any time soon, but they probably hope that such problems as depressed economies, population pressures, and racial and social divisions put time on the side of Marxism throughout the area. They probably also hope that such factors will keep their own costs down. Aside from its massive aid to Cuba—some \$4.7 billion in economic subsidies and supplies last year, plus more than \$500 million in military equipment—the USSR has tried to follow a low cost policy in the region. Much of the armaments now being sent to Nicaragua, for example, are obsolete by Soviet standards, and economic aid for Nicaragua, and Grenada as well, has been kept limited.

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Soviet Tactics

Moscow probably hopes that Cuba, Nicaragua, Grenada and--potentially--Suriname can assist in further Marxist expansion. Working primarily through Cuba, the USSR is:

- Providing military support to new leftist governments.
- Encouraging Communist parties to change their traditional focus on political and labor union activities and direct it toward groups capable of revolutionary violence.
- Supporting broad leftist coalitions that unite not only Moscow-line leftists but other radicals in opposition to existing regimes.
- Providing--either directly or through third countries--military training and equipment for Central American and Caribbean insurgents.

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The USSR is playing a cautious, sometimes covert, hand in the region, while Cuba is more visibly active. The Soviets have modernized and improved Cuban defenses, especially air defenses, in the last few years, but Moscow has, itself, avoided delivering major weapons directly to Nicaragua.

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Moscow's low risk policy seems to stem from a wariness of provoking the US to adopt a stronger policy in the region or making it easier for Washington to rally greater domestic support behind its policies. The Soviets also want to avoid a direct confrontation with the US over Soviet activity in the region. Moscow knows that the US is capable of focusing overwhelming military power on the region, while the USSR has only limited military capabilities in the hemisphere.

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Soviet Military Interests

Although Moscow's main motive in building up Cuba's military capability is to deter the US from undertaking military action against Havana, Moscow undoubtedly is pleased that this is forcing the US armed forces to dedicate more military resources to the Caribbean area. Also, Cuba's growing military capabilities enable it to support radicals in the Western hemisphere, as well as to continue assisting Soviet clients in Angola and Ethiopia.

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In our judgment, Soviet objectives in the Caribbean probably do not assign high priority to dramatically expanding the USSR's own military presence. Although Moscow can doubtless see hypothetical advantage in deploying strategic forces--such as the SS-20--there, it recognizes that this would provoke a major confrontation with the US. The trend in Soviet strategic missile submarine deployments has been toward keeping them closer to home, rather than in areas near targets where they are more vulnerable to the US ASW advantage.

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the USSR is likely to avoid committing scarce resources to an area so close to the US power in times of a major military confrontation with the US. [redacted]

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The USSR also lacks the military airlift or sealift capability to quickly introduce large ground forces into the region. Its Motorized Rifle Brigade in Cuba [redacted] remains essentially a personnel security force for President Castro, [redacted] If the Sandinistas were to need foreign combat forces, Cuba might provide them, not the USSR. [redacted]

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### Soviet Military Options

The Soviets, however, probably are likely to continue incrementally to expand their limited military activity in the region in ways that do not provoke the US. For example, the Soviets, who have long deployed TU-95 reconnaissance planes to Cuba [redacted]

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There are a number of further steps available to the Soviets to improve the military capabilities of their Caribbean clients or to increase the USSR's own military capabilities in the area. Many of these options would be troublesome from the point of view of the US not only because they would increase Soviet influence but also because they would force the US to factor them into our military contingency planning and divert military resources to counter them. [redacted]

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Additional Military Aid. In order to enhance Cuba's security, the USSR could:

- Modernize and augment the Soviet brigade in Cuba, whose main assignment still seems to be local security.
- Deploy the SA-5 to Cuba, either manned by its own or Cuban forces. This would considerably extend the range of Cuban air defenses and in wartime would require the US to destroy the missiles. It would also increase the risk to US intelligence gathering flights in the area.
- Provide the Cubans with the MIG-25 high-altitude interceptor. This, too, could complicate US intelligence efforts as well as creating problems for any attempt to neutralize Soviet weapons that might be stationed in Cuba.
- Continue upgrading Cuban naval forces. This would force the US to consider additional measures to provide some protection for its shipping in the region.
- As part of improving Cuban coastal defenses, provide the new SSC-3 system, which consists of two Styx missiles on a mobile platform. This would add another layer of protection for Cuban coastal areas and further complicate US military planning for global contingencies. [redacted]

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If Moscow comes to feel that the Sandinistas are secure enough to risk tying Soviet prestige to them directly, then the USSR could support them by:

- Delivering weapons directly to Nicaragua, and sending significant numbers of Soviet advisors and technicians with them. These weapons could include the kind of air and naval defense systems that have been supplied to Cuba.
- Stationing a Soviet brigade in Nicaragua similar to the one in Cuba to provide a symbolic security commitment to the regime.

The Soviets could also play a more active role in providing military aid to Grenada and Suriname.

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#### Increased Soviet Military Presence

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There are a number of potential steps that Moscow might take to convey a sense of growing Soviet involvement in the region while complicating US defense planning.

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The USSR might increase its naval visits, begin using Cuban port facilities for logistic support, or seek access to facilities elsewhere in the region. Such activities could include:

- Increased and more regular naval deployments in the region. They could exercise more frequently in the Gulf of Mexico, as we occasionally do when we send ships from the Mediterranean into the Black Sea. Moscow might hope that deployment in the Caribbean would force the US to devote more attention to watching the Soviets there.
- Assisting in developing naval facilities in the region.

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The Soviets could increase their use of Cienfuegos in Cuba.

- Increasing Soviet aircraft use of Caribbean fields. The completion of the Point Salines airfield in Grenada will make it possible for the kind of TU-95 Soviet naval reconnaissance planes that now operate periodically from Cuba to expand their coverage somewhat into the South Atlantic. New airfields now being built in Nicaragua and other improvements there would also enable the USSR to show the flag and extend its military reach by regular military flights over the eastern Pacific. Moscow, however, has little military need for such activity.
- Permanent deployment of ASW aircraft or ASW naval craft in Cuba. This could be aimed at monitoring training and transit areas of US Trident-class SSBNs. Moscow may not think that such defensive deployments would violate the US-Soviet "understanding" regarding strategic weapons in Cuba.

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Potential Strategic Deployments. Pro-Soviet nations in the Caribbean Basin make it possible for the USSR to take more extreme measures that would pose even more substantial military problems for the US. However, we think that Moscow is unlikely to try to turn them into forward bases for Soviet-controlled offensive weapons systems. Such deployments would involve the Soviets in a major confrontation with the US, forcing Moscow to choose between backing down in the face of superior US regional conventional forces or escalating its response to a global strategic scale. [redacted]

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Soviet attempts to establish strategic bases in the region could include:

- Deploying land-based ballistic missile systems, such as the SS-20 or the SS-23, to Cuba, Nicaragua, or Suriname. This would pose serious military problems for the US because of the missiles' shorter flight time, the fact that US early warning capabilities would have to be increased, and the fact that it could cover most time-urgent US targets such as national command centers and SAC air bases.
- Deploying submarines equipped with cruise missiles to the region, possibly basing them in Cuba. This would force the US to increase our ASW resources in the region.
- Using these countries as bases for Backfire bombers. [redacted]

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While an augmentation of the USSR's strategic posture, none of these moves would add decisively to the already great Soviet potential for attacking the US. They would be more to distract American attention and resources from areas of more vital Soviet security concern. They might also be conceived of by Moscow as bargaining chips to seek the withdrawal of some US forces from areas close to the USSR. [redacted]

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SUBJECT: USSR: Politico-Military Objectives and Options  
in the Caribbean Basin

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